

6

*Although the nature of collegiate transition in the sophomore year is different from that of first-year students, it is no less significant or challenging.*

## Sophomores in Transition: The Forgotten Year

*Barbara F. Tobolowsky*

Over the past several decades, student transitions have become a primary focus for many higher education staff and faculty. Not surprisingly, these educators have concerned themselves primarily with the transition into college, because high first-year attrition numbers reflect how challenging this transition is for many new students. Attention has also been given to the senior-year transition, because it is the last opportunity institutions have to ensure that students are adequately prepared for the working world or graduate school. Researchers focus on beginning and ending transitions by exploring the needs, behaviors, and expectations of both first-year students and seniors through national and institution-specific surveys such as the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey and the National Survey of Student Engagement and by assessing the outcomes of targeted programs such as first-year and senior seminars.

The same research focus has not been given to the sophomore and junior years. There is no national instrument that specifically explores student issues and concerns in the middle years of the collegiate experience. The lack of research on the junior year is particularly striking given the importance of the junior year in a student's college experience. Traditionally the junior year is the time when students are finally able to focus on courses in their major, and it is often when students engage in special experiential opportunities such as internships, extended service opportunities, and study abroad. In addition, these students have the bulk of the leadership responsibilities on many campuses through service as peer leaders, mentors, and resident advisors. However, given the absence of both research

and focused campus programs, we leave discussion of the junior year, by necessity, for a later time.

This chapter focuses on the sophomore-year experience, which in the past few years has moved from the background to the forefront for increasing numbers of researchers and campus practitioners. I discuss the unique issues related to the sophomore year, share findings from current research, and conclude with recommendations for those seeking to offer sophomore initiatives or improve those already in existence.

### **Making the Case for the Importance of the Sophomore Year**

Educators should be interested in the sophomore year because this is the year in which students make many of the decisions that help them succeed in subsequent years, such as clarifying their sense of purpose, making major declarations, and narrowing their career options. While some may think that the national conversation about the sophomore year is simply another educational fad, discussion of sophomore issues actually dates back to 1956 when Freedman coined the phrase “sophomore slump.” He characterized the second year as one of student inertia and confusion, and contemporary educators note similar behaviors among today’s sophomores (Gansemer-Topf, Stern, and Benjamin, 2007).

Some have argued that the significant attention many institutions now give to first-year students has actually made the second year the more difficult transition experience (Scott Evenbeck, personal communication to the author, October 2006). This growing realization that the second year is another potential period of risk for today’s college students led the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition to publish a monograph that explored the sophomore year (Schreiner and Pattengale, 2000). It was groundbreaking work because it exposed not only the issues for sophomores, but also institutional approaches designed to help them.

In 2005, the National Resource Center, again responding to needs expressed by educators, conducted a study exploring the range of programmatic initiatives that U.S. colleges and universities offer sophomores. That research led to a 2007 monograph that included quantitative findings as well as case studies of exemplary programs from public and private institutions in the United States (Tobolowsky and Cox, 2007).

No one can be sure exactly why, after years of ignoring sophomores, educators became interested in this student population. But perhaps it was the synergy of a number of key dynamics. First, at many private campuses, students develop four-year plans that identify learning outcomes for each of the four years. This focus on each year as a distinct time period in the college experience necessarily shed light on the second year.

As private college educators gained awareness of second-year issues, they turned to peer institutions and the National Resource Center for insights regarding programs and supports, which led to conference discussions on sophomores and, in turn, research and publications. This initial movement, led in large part by private institutions such as Beloit College, Colorado College, and Colgate University, encouraged educators at public colleges and universities to turn their attention to sophomores as well. Also, faculty and administrators who saw the success of first-year programs on their campuses found that a focus on second-year students was a natural extension of their earlier efforts. Finally, this more intentional focus on the needs of sophomores may have resulted from institutional concerns about retention: excluding the first year, more students drop out of higher education in the second year than any other year of college (Lipka, 2006).

What is going on that causes second-year students to leave? As with any other departure, the answer is not singular or simple. Freedman (1956) suggested that a “sophomore slump” could be the cause. Students who have not clarified their reasons for attending college or have not selected a major may feel the inertia, confusion, and resulting stress that define the sophomore slump. In addition, courses may become more challenging in the second year as students begin to focus on fields of potential interest. They feel a greater investment in these courses than in some of the first-year general education courses that seemed unrelated to their desired career. This greater investment raises the stakes for students, resulting in added pressure and stress (Coburn and Treeger, 2003; Evenbeck, Boston, DuVivier, and Hallberg, 2000; Freedman, 1956). In more recent research, sophomores discussed feeling “invisible” and “lost.” These students felt they were not getting the support they need to make the critical decisions they must make in their second year (Gansemer-Topf, Stern, and Benjamin, 2007).

Other researchers have investigated both previous and current student development theories to see if any of the extant theories might shed light on second-year students. Lemons and Douglas (1987) noted that four of Chickering’s vectors (1969) explain the issues of sophomore students: developing competence, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, establishing identity, and developing purpose. Baxter Magolda (1992) found that sophomores tended to fall in earlier stages of intellectual development (that is, absolute knowing and transitional knowing). Most recently Schaller (2005) developed a four-stage model based on interviews she conducted with sophomore students at four-year institutions. This model directly relates to the students’ process of making a decision on a major: moving from random exploration through focused exploration and tentative choices to commitment.

Thus, as sophomores’ voices are heard and as faculty, administrators, and staff recognize the needs of these students, various initiatives have been created to address those needs. These efforts run the gamut from social

activities to more academic ones, but each represents this new focus on the sophomore transition.

## **Findings of the National Survey of Sophomore Initiatives**

In 2005, as a way to better understand institutional efforts, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition conducted a national survey of sophomore initiatives. All regionally accredited private and public four-year institutions were sent an e-mail message inviting them to participate in the Web-based survey. The response rate was 33.5 percent, with 382 institutions participating in the survey.

The survey questions addressed the types of initiatives offered, their administrative homes, and any assessment conducted evaluating the effectiveness of the initiatives. The survey found that sophomore programs are often new and have not been subjected to assessment. Seldom did institutions describe comprehensive approaches to the second year. Rather, they either offered distinct programs that might focus exclusively on sophomores or programs designed for all students in which sophomores were encouraged to participate.

The most common institutional efforts directed at sophomores are those focused on career planning (74.2 percent), major selection (65.3 percent), and academic advising (61 percent). This seems appropriate in that sophomores are often required to declare their majors during or at the end of the sophomore year. Institutions also provide engagement opportunities for sophomores through class events such as trips, dinners, and dances (46.3 percent); student government (38.7 percent); service-learning or community service (32.8 percent); and cultural events such as plays, musical events, and multicultural fairs (18.8 percent). There are also efforts to engage students academically through special credit-bearing courses geared to sophomores (31.4 percent) and opportunities to coteach, mentor, or assist in teaching a class (20.7 percent).

Campus efforts described by survey respondents are designed to address one or more of the following five goals: creating a sense of community, fostering social engagement, facilitating faculty-student interaction, encouraging major and career exploration, and promoting academic engagement and leadership.

**A Sense of Community.** Some institutions offer publications geared specifically toward their second-year students (16.8 percent) to help create a unique class identity. These publications might take the form of newsletters, Web sites, or brochures. Regardless of their form, all provide information on events and deadlines of particular interest to sophomores. At Drew University, students and parents are sent a letter from the dean acquainting them with events specific to careers, as well as information regarding offices that might assist students in selecting a major. The

University of Denver has a second-year Web site that includes information about a half-day reorientation conference and other programs, as well as frequently asked questions about registration, internships, advising, and other topics.

Efforts to build community do not stop at publications. Beloit College has offered a long-running sophomore retreat to help second-year students establish a sense of community. Macalester College holds the Sophomore Fiesta, and Colorado College hosts the Sophomore Luau with the primary objective of building a collective identity. Other institutions go beyond campus events and offer class trips to achieve this goal. Both Washington and Lee University and Colgate University host sophomore trips to Washington, D.C. New York University uses the vast resources of the city to engage students with trips to local museums. These initiatives, which vary greatly, are all intended to engage students and build community.

**Social Engagement.** Often second-year students begin to question the relationships they developed during the first year and seek new, healthy relationships with their peers (Schaller, 2005). Many social and academic opportunities, including retreats (Beloit College, Grinnell College) and peer mentoring (University of Rhode Island), help students connect with other students. Other sophomore-specific initiatives that foster social engagement include curricular learning communities (Emory University, Texas Tech University, Colorado College), a lecture series (Colgate University), trips (Emory, Washington and Lee University), dances (Rowan University, Saint Anselm College), and dinners or other special meals (Yale University, Loyola College, St. Lawrence University). All of these experiences expose second-year students to new peer groups and encourage them to develop meaningful relationships with other students.

**Student-Faculty Interaction.** Many researchers (Astin, 1993; Kuh and Hu, 2001) have reported the benefits of student-faculty interaction both in and outside the classroom. This survey also found that campuses are creating situations that encourage these interactions. For example, faculty often serve as mentors to sophomore students (31.4 percent) to encourage student-faculty interaction outside the classroom. At Bennington College, for instance, three faculty members from different disciplines, as well as the student's faculty adviser, meet with the student several times throughout the student's college career to review and revise their four-year plan. This process ensures ongoing student-faculty interaction.

**Major and Career Exploration.** Major and career exploration is clearly the main goal of the sophomore year, and many of the initiatives offered are geared to help students in decision making in these areas. In addition to career and major fairs, which are common on many campuses, some institutions offer other unique programs. West Virginia University sponsors the Sophomore Outdoor Adventure Reorientation (SOAR) program, a one-week spring or summer outdoor adventure trip that focuses on helping students explore and determine their majors. The residential colleges at Yale University have

special sophomore advising nights, when the college dean and residential students discuss how to choose a major.

As students turn their attention to career development and major selection, self-assessments are a natural part of that inquiry. Students need to know their interests and goals before they make those decisions. The Career Services Office at Asbury College provides self-assessment as part of the career advising program to help sophomores select their major. Because many sophomore students are questioning their identity and sense of meaning and purpose, opportunities for self-assessment and reflection can prove to be extremely beneficial as students make their initial, if not final, career and major decisions.

**Academic Engagement and Leadership.** Campuses also seek to encourage students' intellectual development in the sophomore year. One approach that Beloit College and Colorado College use is to provide venture grants to sophomores that enable them to explore their areas of interest. For instance, Beloit offers the grants to support the students "to travel, do research, start a business, something they always wanted to do" but lacked the resources. Other campuses have service-learning requirements that help students see the world outside themselves. One of the key outcomes of service-learning is to make students better citizens and encourage them to reflect on their own identity. Benedict College requires sophomores to complete twenty hours of service each semester, with the goal of students' "putting their learning into action and honing their leadership skills."

Several institutions engage students academically by offering credit-bearing courses for sophomores. At Emory University and Rhodes College, these courses are part of the core requirements; at Austin College, a sophomore course focuses on leadership development. Several institutions provide opportunities for sophomores to coteach or assist in teaching that not only develop leadership potential but also help engage them academically. At Willamette University, sophomore students can serve as teaching assistants in the first-year seminar course, and at the University of Rhode Island, students coteach the seminar. These classroom experiences help students gain leadership skills as well as academic expertise.

Students have other noncourse-based leadership opportunities during their second year. Furman University offers leadership training, while Butler University, Austin College, and the State University of New York at Fredonia have sophomore class officers who provide the sophomore voice in campuswide discussions or plan second-year-focused events. Sophomore programming is wide ranging, addressing both the academic and social development of students.

## Recommendations

Research (National Resource Center, 2005) finds that an emphasis on sophomores is a new programming area for many institutions. Although

sophomores deserve attention and efforts, the task of providing more programming and assistance seems daunting with resources that are already stretched. Here are seven steps for creating or improving sophomore initiatives (Tobolowsky and Cox, 2007):

*Do not work alone.* Begin to seek out others on campus who are interested in sophomore issues. Many movements begin as grassroots efforts, so search out like-minded colleagues. In addition, try to get higher administration's buy-in, because if programs are part of institutional long-range planning, they will be ensured financial support.

*Take stock of the current situation.* Taking stock has two primary steps. First, talk to students to determine their needs and concerns. Then conduct a campus audit to identify what is being offered. This may sometimes require serious investigation because these programs are rarely housed in one office. However, much can be learned from this process. Sometimes programs that work well for a small subset of students (perhaps a mentoring program for sophomores interested in science) will be good for the entire class. An audit of existing programs developed for sophomores may lead to reorganizing the offerings under one office or appointing a director of second-year programs.

*Develop second-year traditions.* The process of developing traditions provides students an opportunity to reestablish relationships, form new ones, and feel that they matter and belong. These events can include welcome-back events prior to the start of the second year, a sophomore common reading or lecture series, or a dance or other social gathering for second-year students. Ideally, campuses should offer a number of second-year events that engage sophomores academically and socially.

*Provide career and major exploration events.* These events help students accomplish what is perhaps the most critical issue of the sophomore year: declaring a major and thinking about career decisions. They can include major and career information fairs or requiring sophomores do self-assessments to assist them in the decision-making process.

*Communicate to sophomores.* One of the most telling findings from the National Survey of Sophomore Initiatives was that having a second-year newsletter (electronic or hard copy) was a relatively easy and inexpensive way to communicate events of interest to sophomores. Communication shows students they matter, and it lets them know about events or activities of special interest.

*Provide good advising for sophomores.* We know that "good advising is the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (Light, 2001, p. 81). Since most institutions want their students to be able to declare their majors by the end of the sophomore year, the importance of advising cannot be overstated.

*Assess the impact of all programs and activities.* Research speaks volumes to higher education administrators. Be sure to include assessment as an

element in the development of every program and initiative; only then will you know how to improve or build on your efforts.

## Conclusion

Clearly the sophomore transition is important because of the several critical decisions students must make in their sophomore year. In the past, in spite of their importance, sophomores have been neglected as campuses focused their efforts primarily on first-year and senior students. Recently researchers and practitioners have started to look at sophomores as a unique cohort and have uncovered the transition issues tied to the second year. This chapter shares some of those findings to illuminate institutional responses to second-year issues. In most cases, campuses offer ad hoc or piecemeal programs rather than comprehensive, holistic, and assessed initiatives that address second-year students' academic and social needs and assist them in their transition through college.

Lessons learned from the success of many first-year and senior initiatives can be applied to initiatives designed for the sophomore year. The most important lesson is this: a comprehensive approach to the sophomore year, embedded in campus culture and tied to the campus mission, is more likely to yield broad institutional support and long-term sustainability than a fragmented approach. This chapter provides educators the information they need to help move sophomores from the shadows into positions of greater visibility within colleges and universities.

## References

- Astin, A. W. *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. *Knowing and Reasoning in College*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992.
- Chickering, A. W. *Education and Identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1969.
- Coburn, K. L., and Treeger, M. L. *Letting Go*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.
- Evenbeck, S. E., Boston, M., DuVivier, R. S., and Hallberg, K. "Institutional Approaches to Helping Sophomores." In L. A. Schreiner and J. Pattengale (eds.), *Visible Solutions for Invisible Students: Helping Sophomores Succeed*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2000.
- Freedman, M. B. "The Passage Through College." *Journal of Social Issues*, 1956, 12(4), 13–28.
- Gansemmer-Topf, A. M., Stern, J. M., and Benjamin, M. "Examining the Experiences of Second-Year Students at a Private Liberal Arts College." In B. F. Tobolowsky and B. E. Cox (eds.), *Shedding Light on Sophomores: An Exploration of the Second College Year*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2007.
- Kuh, G., and Hu, S. "The Effects of Student-Faculty Interaction in the 1990s." *Review of Higher Education*, 2001, 24, 309–332.
- Lemons, L. J., and Douglas, R. R. "A Developmental Perspective of Sophomore Slump." *NASPA Journal*, 1987, 24(3), 15–19.

- Light, R. *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Lipka, S. "After the Freshman Bubble Pops: More Colleges Try to Help Their Sophomores Thrive." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept. 8, 2006, p. A34.
- National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. *National Survey of Sophomore-Year Initiatives*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2005.
- Schaller, M. A. "Wandering and Wondering: Traversing the Uneven Terrain of the Second College Year." *About Campus*, July–Aug. 2005, pp. 17–24.
- Schreiner, L. A., and Pattengale, J. (eds.). *Visible Solutions for Invisible Students: Helping Sophomores Succeed*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2000.
- Tobolowsky, B. F., and Cox, B. E. (eds.). *Shedding Light on Sophomores: An Exploration of the Second College Year*. Columbia: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2007.

BARBARA TOBOLOWSKY is associate director of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition and clinical faculty member in the University of South Carolina's College of Education.